



TRANSLATING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: CROSSING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

—SARALA JAG MOHAN*

The need and importance of literary translations have by now been universally recognized and have ceased to be points of debate. Great literary works are produced by every country and in every age. Unless these works get translated into different languages, they would remain confined to the readers of the languages in which they are written and the readers of other languages would be deprived of the opportunity of enjoying them. But the written word, especially the creative word, is so great a contribution to human life and culture that it should be known as widely as possible. This can happen only with the help of translations, not only of great works of

adult literature which should be considered an integral part of literary activity.

Apart from a worldwide view, the importance of translations of children's books is all the greater even at a national level in a multi-lingual country like India. India has 16 major languages recognized by the Constitution and 22 languages recognized by the Sahitya Akademi. Apart from these there are 1625 dialects. Each one of these languages has a growing number of writers who write not only for adults but also for children. There are also quite a number of writers writing exclusively for children.

But with so many languages with so

*Mrs. Sarala Jag Mohan is one of the founder members of the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children. As a girl, she participated actively in the struggle for freedom and she taught for twenty years in schools. For the last forty years she has been doing translation work in Gujarati, Hindi and English and has translated books for National Book Trust, Children's Book Trust, Publications Division and Sahitya Akademi. In 1989 she was given the prestigious Dwivageesh Award for translation work by the Bhartiya Anuvad Parishad.

many different scripts, India, despite its underlying unity, is a land of many diverse cultural and social traditions. The literatures produced in these different languages have such distinct characteristics that intercommunication is possible only through translations of literary works, which should necessarily include children's literature.

Translating good children's literature is particularly important in the peculiar context of contemporary Indian life which is dominated by so many divisive and dissipating forces. The children of India should know what is being written for their counterparts who belong to other regions and speak other languages. Of course, the stories from the *Panchatantra*, *Kathasaritsagara* and the Jatakas, which are a common heritage of Indian languages and children have enjoyed them over the ages. These stories are likely to interest and enthrall them in the future too, in spite of the technological encroachment on their means of entertainment.

It is indeed a happy sign that even as children are attracted by the idiot-box, they are also interested in reading books. Bringing to them books from other languages of the country through translations would certainly interest them. Apart from that, such translations would lead to the enrichment of children's literature as a whole. While talking about enrichment, though the greatest importance should be given to the translations of children's books in Indian languages, outstanding books for children in foreign languages may not be ruled out. In fact, some of the world classics for children like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Huckleberry Finn* etc., have found their way into many Indian languages and children reading those languages have been enjoying them. But works of modern chil-

dren's writers should also be taken up for translation. Of course, priority should be given to good children's literature written by modern Indian writers, some modern classics for children in foreign languages should also be presented to the children of India in their own languages—for, even though children should primarily belong to the soil and culture of India, they should also learn to look beyond the Indian horizon, since ultimately, the aim is to make them citizens of the world.

Just as writing for children is not easy, translating children's literature is not easy either. What is written beautifully for children in one language has to come out as beautifully in its translation. The young reader has to have a feeling of having read that work in his own language. In other words, the translation has to be so natural, spontaneous and lively that it does not read like a translation but an original work.

To do such a translation, the translator needs to have something more than the expert knowledge of the two languages, which, of course is the first requisite. With that expert knowledge, he must have the ability to use the words and expressions that are within the range of understanding of the children for whom he translates. But he can breathe life into his translation only when he is able to bring in a creative touch in his translation. He should also be able to place himself at the intellectual and emotional level of children.

Neither the writer nor the translator of children's literature can afford to be pedantic. The adult in him should recede in the background, except in being on his guard to see that just as in writing for children, in translating children's literature too, nothing incorrect or faulty enters into his language, whether in terms of usage, syntax, spellings, even punctuations. Anything that is presented to the child, whether in an original work or in a trans-

lation, has to be absolutely correct in fact and expression. Hence, the importance of choosing for translation an appropriate original work, which fulfils all these conditions of being good children's literature and faultlessly presenting it to the children of another language.

The translator should be all the more careful while translating for very young children whose vocabulary is very limited. He should imaginatively use the words that fall within that range.

Not only that, special abilities are required for translating various forms of children's literature. And translating children's poems needs a very special ability. The translator should have a correct realization of his abilities and limitations and he should choose his field of translation only according to his special ability.

Translation, particularly of children's literature, means breaking the language barriers and acquainting children with what is being written for them in different languages. However, translating children's literature means much more than breaking the language barriers. At best, it would be only a superficial aim. It is common knowledge that language is not just the words that people use to converse and write and to express orally or in written form, human thoughts and emotions. It is a lot more than that.

The written word is more crystallized than the spoken word. The development of the written word from the primordial pictorial symbols to the present form is indeed a landmark in the development of culture all over the world. It is as vital to cultural development of the human race as the discovery of fire and wheel to the growth of civilization. There too the evolution of language suitable for children's literature is very significant, for only with the development of such a language, it has become possible to write and translate for children.

The language of a region as it develops over the ages, symbolizes its history, culture, civilization and geographical conditions and the social experiences of the people of that region, all of which get reflected in children's literature as well. So, even when children's literature in one language is translated into another language, along with bringing a story or a poem into the language of translation, it also means transporting all those factors.

Thus, while breaking the language barriers by translating children's literature, the translator, at the same time, exposes the young and inquisitive reader to another world. He opens new doors and windows for them through which to enter and accept that unfamiliar world and awakens them to the fact that even though children and their elders in different parts of the country, and also the world, speak different languages, live and dress differently and eat different types of food, they are all the same everywhere.

This is particularly true in the case of India. This country with not only divergent cultural and social traditions, but equally divergent geographical features and climatic conditions ranging from extreme heat to extreme cold and from almost no-rain regions to non-stop rain regions, necessarily has varied styles of living. These too are unfailingly reflected in children's literature.

Through translation of children's literature, the children of the Himalayan regions can be acquainted with the sea and the fisherfolk of Maharashtra or Kerala and the children of Tamil Nadu can experience the snowfall in Kashmir. They would know what the people in different regions wear and what they eat. At the same time, they would also know that children everywhere are the same—fun-loving, noisy and naughty. They would also know that mothers and fathers everywhere love and care for their children. They would

know that everywhere, mothers cook and fathers bring money for the family.

And what about festivals and celebrations? India has many festivals which include the worship of several gods and goddesses. Through translations of children's literature, the growing generation of India would know about those festivals. They would also know that even though festivals like Dussehra and Diwali are common throughout India, there are some festivals that are special only to some regions. But some festivals in India, whether known as Makara Sankranti or Lohri, Pongal or Onam or any other regional name, bring out the most essential fact that India is an agricultural country and the large majority of its population lives in villages. Children would become aware of this when they read juvenile literature translated from other Indian languages.

They would become aware about the essential unity of the country and its people despite striking linguistic and cultural differences. In the prevailing atmosphere of strife and conflict, it is necessary to help them realize this. It is necessary to awaken a feeling of oneness among them while they are still at the receptive stage. Translators of children's literature would be indirectly fulfilling this very important function.

The need for translating children's literature is just beginning to be recognized. When it comes to that, even children's literature is not readily accepted as literature and children's writers are only grudgingly acknowledged as writers. Yet, in many languages of India, there are quite a few established writers of adult literature who have also been very successful children's writers. They should be known to a wide range of readership. This is possible only through translations of their work.

Getting children's books translated and having them published on a regular basis is a gigantic task which needs institutional

support. The majority of the states in India have official or semi-official organizations devoted to the publications of children's books. Organizations like the Nehru Bal Pustakalaya of the National Book Trust, and the National Council of Educational Research and Training are engaged in the publication of not only original children's books, but also their translations. The publications Division also publishes children's books in original as well as in translations. There are some institutions like the Publications Board of Assam, Rashtrothan Parishat and Bal Sahitya Mandala of Karnataka and similar organizations in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere, that take interest in promoting children's books. Such institutions do publish translations now and again, but they can help in giving a boost to the movement of translations of children's books by adopting a regular and sustained translation programme. For, what these organizations are doing is very little compared to what needs to be done. Concerned efforts should be made to undertake an organized programme of regularly publishing translations of good children's books all over the country. Individuals can contribute their mite, but the requirements of good translations of worthwhile children's books can be met only organizationally. There are also some private voluntary organizations, including the Association of Writers and Illustrations for Children, trying to promote children's literature in the country. There should be many more organizations devoted to the publication of children's literature. In addition to what they are doing already, it is necessary that these organizations have translation cell as committees, to select appropriate books for translation, as committees of evaluators and panel of translators. They could also organize workshops for translators so that periodically fresh teams of translators get trained. It is necessary that there is some coordination among the existing organiza-

tions devoted to children's literature so that the selection of the books to be translated is done without the danger of overlapping. The books should be carefully and imaginatively selected so as to enable children to understand their past and the present and also kindle their imagination to look into the 21st century which is just round the corner.

Much is being written for children in different languages of India. Although all that is written is not quality literature, some very good things are being written and they should be brought out in translations. Not only that, the translators who are generally denied the credit due to them, should be accorded the status they deserve.

All that can be done individually and organizationally, should be done. Publishers also should become more enterprising and

sponsor the publication of translations of good children's books. Obviously, the responsibility of the Government in this matter is very great. It should do much more than to treat it in a casual manner. But till the Government is awakened to its responsibility towards the children of the country, all possible attempts should be made to enrich children's literature in India and they should be continued even if the Government steps into the field in a big way.

In making such efforts, a little idealism would be of great value. Even if it means sacrificing part of the material rewards, especially for the publishers, it would be for the sake of the children of India. Children always deserve the best, and no sacrifice made for them should be considered too big. A lot should be written and translated for the children of today and tomorrow. The time is to act here and now!